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ABSTRACT

Noting that intercultural understanding is a prime construct in the study of intercultural communication, this paper examines two questions that confront all intercultural communication researchers: (1) What are the underlying characteristics of intercultural understanding? and (2) What constitutes an interpretative perspective to intercultural understanding? The paper addresses the first question through a discussion of the importance of acquiring the implicit, taken-for-granted knowledge structures that influence everyday conversational usage in a culture. It argues that to understand the relationship between culture and everyday communication conduct, researchers must understand concepts such as cultural conversational pathway, the preferable mode of interaction, the manner of delivery, and turn-taking conversational rules in conjunction with appropriateness of context. In addressing the second question, the paper argues for an ethnographic coherence approach to elicit and simultaneously evoke a system of sociocultural meanings of a speech community. (FL)

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INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: AN INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVE

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INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: AN INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVE

Intercultural understanding is a prime construct in the study of intercultural communication. On the specific level, intercultural understanding entails the sense-making process between two conversants from two cultural systems, attempting to make coherent sense of everyday conversation. On the broader level, intercultural understanding may be cast in the light of interpretive research, with the researcher striving to arrive at an interpretive explanation of the intercultural situation.

Unfortunately, while intercultural understanding appears to be the foundation to effective intercultural communication, there is as yet no single study that has systematically dealt with the critical issues that undergird intercultural understanding. The objective of this essay is to fill such a void. Specifically, the paper will be developed along the following lines: First, what are the defining characteristics of intercultural understanding? Second, what constitutes an interpretive perspective to intercultural understanding?

INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: AN INTERPRETIVE PROCESS

Intercultural understanding is an interpretive, sense-making process between two intercultural interactants in their efforts to co-create a common interpretive system of meanings for the on-going face-to-face conversation. Drawing upon the socio-cultural knowledge of the conversational situation, understanding is a goal-emergent process wherein the two intercultural conversants attempt to cohere in their interpretive process of the conversation. In short, socio-cultural knowledge of the situation provides the larger contextual frame of meanings in which the conversation is to be understood. The two conversants, in negotiating a common frame of knowledge reference, come together for the purpose of achieving a situationally-dependent, interpersonal goal.

Culture, in short, is defined in this essay as "a system of knowledge, a composite of the cognitive systems more or less shared by members of a society" (Keesing, 1979, p. 14). Culture provides the common-sense logic in which the culturally-grounded everyday conversation may be situationally expressed and interpreted. As Geertz (1975), in discussing culture as a "common sense" system, aptly observes:

> When we say someone shows common sense we mean to suggest more than that he is just using his eyes and ears, but is, as we say, keeping them open, using them judiciously, intelligently, perceptively, reflectively, or trying to, and that he is capable of coping with everyday problems in an everyday way with some effectiveness. (p. 8)

Culture, as a common-sense knowledge system, mandates how conversational activities and routines should be common-sensically interpreted and understood. Hence, the degree and content of "local knowledge" one possesses in an intercultural situation will greatly affect one's effective functioning in an intercultural encounter situation.

In particular, using Edward T. Hall's (1976; 1983) typology of high-context cultures (HCC) and low-context cultures (LCC), one may infer two perspectives of intercultural understanding: A HCC situational perspective and a LCC communicational perspective.

According to Hall (1976), the "HC [High Context] transactions featured preprogrammed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted message. LC [Low Context] transactions are the reverse. Most of the information must be in the transmitted message to make up for what is missing in the context . . ." (p. 101). In general, HCC refers to a group of cultures which value group-orientation, implicit "restricted" communication patterns, and maintain a homogeneous normative structure with high interactional predictability across communicative situations. Conversely, LCC refers to a group of cultures which value individual-orientation, overt "elaborated"

communication patterns, and maintain a heterogeneous normative structure with relatively low degree of interactional predictability across communicative situations. Although no one culture exists exclusively at one extreme, for Hall (1976), the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese cultures are viewed as loaded on the high-context continuum; and United States, Germany, Scandinavia, and Switzerland are viewed as loaded on the low-context continuum.

Using the HCC and LCC dimensions on intercultural understanding, it is apparent that differential knowledge structures (beyond the mastery of local language) hold different hierarchical values in a HCC system versus a LCC system. To function effectively in a HCC system, a firm grasp of the local cultural knowledge constitutes the first key step to intercultural understanding. The local history, the local customs, the local ceremonies and rituals, and the local scents and tastes, all serve as the fundamental contextual fabric to within-culture understanding and between-cultures' understanding. In comparison, the mastery of local cultural knowledge is relatively not as important in the LCC as in the HCC system. Further, in a HCC system, the mastery of social knowledge constitutes the second essential step to intercultural understanding. Concepts such as appropriate norms of interaction, social roles and positions, social distance and relationship, status, occupation, age, and gender, have a profound influence on conversational understanding in the HCC system. For example, in Japan, beyond the concepts of tataemae (sensitivity toward others, public self) and honne (sensitivity toward one's own private self), the concept of suji (the situational significance of an event) is the third most important element to effective cross-cultural and intercultural understanding. According to Hall (1983), suji assumes "an immersion in a highly contexted culture which includes not only an understanding of the manifest content of a communication, but also an appreciation of the situational contexting aspects. This includes everything

else in the situation which has a bearing on the roles that are being acted out" (p. 95). In contrast, socio-situational cues are relatively not as important in the LCC as in the HCC system.

However, while HCC systems operate primarily from a situational perspective, LCC systems operate mainly from a communicational perspective. While socio-cultural knowledge structures serve as the larger interpretive schemas in HCC conversational understanding, knowledge structures of the rhetorical skills in LCC serve as an essential step to effective LCC conversational understanding. For example, according to Okabe (1983), in a low-context culture like that of the United States, "where very little is taken-for-granted, greater cultural diversity and heterogeneity are likely to make verbal skills more necessary and therefore, more highly prized . . . . In a high context-culture, such as Japan's, however, cultural homogeneity encourages suspicion of verbal skills, confidence in the unspoken, and eagerness to avoid confrontation. The Japanese have even developed haragei, or the 'art of the belly' for the meeting of minds or at least the viscera, without clear verbal interaction" (p. 39). In essence, intercultural understanding in the HCC may be achieved through the meeting of the hearts, while intercultural understanding in the LCC may be accomplished through the meeting of the minds. Interpretive understanding in the HCC relies heavily on intuitive logic or the "common-sense" knowledge of the cultural system; in contrast, interpretive understanding in the LCC relies heavily on analytical logic of the particular conversational situation.

As Okabe (1983) perceptively notes: "The logicality of English language may be thought of as a line. The listener proceeds toward understanding what the speaker says as he or she follows the coherent, linear route of the speaker . . . . The Japanese language on the other hand, tends to make for a pointlike, dotlike, spacelike thinking. The speaker organizes his or her ideas and thoughts in a stepping-stone mode: The listener is supposed to supply what is left

unsaid" (pp. 28 - 29). Hence, the function, scope, and patterns of communication assume differential cultural values in different cultural communication systems. Accurate interpretive understanding of the conversational situation relies heavily on whether the conversation is occurring in a HCC interaction context or in a LCC interaction context. Specifically, the different types of socio-cultural knowledge in different cultural situations serve as both the expectational rules and the normative rules to a coherent, intercultural conversation.

Intercultural misunderstanding between a HCC member and a LCC member may arise when: (1) one misapplies different standards and types of cultural knowledge to interpret the intercultural discourse, (2) the conversational route (or pathway) is in misalignment with general (or "common sense") cultural practice, (3) one mis-emphasizes one mode of communication (e.g. verbal) over another (e.g. nonverbal) in the wrong socio-cultural context, (4) one mis-applies and mis-interprets the paralinguistic features (such as tone of voice) of certain culturally-grounded speech acts (hence, misunderstanding a joke as an insult, a compliment as a sarcasm, etc.), and (5) the inappropriate use of culturally-grounded turn-taking rules (e.g. using interruption rather than waiting for the appropriate turn of speaking) and linguistic expressions (e.g. using inappropriate metaphors or cliché) to the degree of violating the expectational dimension, normative dimension, temporal dimension, and the spatial dimension of the situationally-grounded communicative interaction.

In summary, culture provides the presuppositional context in which intercultural understanding may be achieved. Contingent on <u>where</u> the intercultural conversation is occuring, <u>to whom</u> the conversation is addressed, and <u>how</u> the conversational rules should be played out, <u>interpretive convergence</u> occurs when members from two different cultures actually cohere in their interpretive process of the in situ conversation. <u>Interpretive divergence</u> arises when either one of the cultural members implicitly or explicitly violates the interpretive rules

and/or the conversational rules of the interpersonal discourse. Intercultural understanding is accomplished when there is a convergence between the cultural member's interpretations of the discourse situation. Intercultural misunderstanding arises, when there is an interpretive divergence over how the conversation should be common-sensically expressed or understood. The next section of this essay addresses the following question: What constitutes an interpretive perspective to "intercultural understanding"?

INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC COHERENCE FRAMEWORK

Ethnographic coherence is the interpretive process of ethnographic understanding. An ethnographer, coming from a "stranger" position to study intracultural or intercultural understanding, is in the constant process of disambiguating and recreating the interpretive schemas (goals, frames, and plans) the social conversants used in a communicative situation. Simply stated, the goal of a communication ethnographer is to simultaneously engage in the process of de-construction and re-construction of the tacit, taken-for-granted cultural text (or cultural knowledge) that the local natives used in "making sense" of their everyday conversation. Ethnographic coherence is achieved when the ethnographer's interpretation of the social discourse is in close alignment with the natives' interpretive schemas of the symbolic situation. Ethnographic incoherence occurs, when the ethnographer cannot provide a full interpretive explanation of the conversational situation which incorporates the dimensions of cultural expectation, social norms, background knowledge, and the temporal and spatial constraints that govern the communicative situation. Hence, ethnographic coherence is the interpretive process of inquiry whereby the primary interest of the ethnographer is to investigate how meanings are constructed in face-to-face human interaction.

A communication ethnographer, when engaging in a frame analysis of the conversational situation, is typically interested in delineating the tacit,

taken-for-granted socio-cultural premises and assumptions that organize conversational interpretation (Goffman, 1974; Hopper, 1981). The TFGs (i.e. the taken-for-granted assumptions) which have been conceptualized by previous researchers as "frames," "scripts," "schema,""myths," or "episodes," represent the mosaic-like interpretive process of the ethnographer, in his/her attempts to infuse a coherent system of meanings in the conversational environment. To be more specific, ethnographic coherence typically involves the three phases of: Surprise, breakdown, and resolution.

The communication ethnographer experiences the element of surprise when s/he encounters internal and external changes because of the new symbolic situation. Symbolic forms, on this unfolding stage, acquire different shades of meanings, intensity, status, and values. The ethnographer is most likely at this stage, to compare and contrast the new experience with the old, and engages in wonderment and surprise of how to common-sensically "make sense" of the unfolding symbolic situation. S/he encounters a gap between anticipatory expectation and the actual symbolic experience. S/he is in the phase of "ethnographic surprise." The next two phases of ethnographic coherence entail the processes of "ethnographic breakdown" and "ethnographic resolution" (Agar, 1982). Ethnographic breakdown is the "lack of fit between one's encounter with a tradition and the new expectations contained in the schemas by which one's organizes one's experiences" (Agar, 1982, p. 784). Ethnographic resolution is the emergent process of understanding through the repeated modifications of interpretive schemas to the symbolic actions until no breakdown occurs. Ethnographic coherence is attained when the ethnographer is able to offer an accurate, interpretive account of the why, what, and how of the conversational situation, and is able to connect the cultural motifs and social patterns that are embedded in the various cultural forms of conversation. It is important to note however, that these three ethnographic coherent phases do not necessarily

follow a linear, sequential path of research inquiry. Rather, ethnographic coherence may be viewed as a spiral process in which the three basic steps of surprise-breakdown-resolution cycle and re-cycle themselves in the mosaic-pattern like interpretive process of the ethnographer--until a level of "interpretive truth" has been reached to account fully and accurately for the interpretive process of the conversants, in regard to the situationally-grounded social discourse.

The next question asks: How should a communication ethnographer go about studying "intercultural understanding"? On the broader level, Philipsen's (1980) Cultural Communication Perspective (CCP) may offer some potentially rich possibilities into the interpretive nature of intercultural understanding. Specifically, the CCP presents a superordinate goal in understanding the normative relationship between culture and communication conduct. The CCP advocates that certain thematic motifs and recurring patterns of a culture can be elicited through the systematic examination of the following three primary cultural communicative forms: Speech ritual, myth, and social drama. Speech ritual is the repeated naming of the sacred object in the performance of everyday conversational routines. The sacred object has a metaphorical status to which the rest of the cultural members pay homage. (e.g. sports' metaphors in US culture) Conversely, speech ritual also implies the concept of speech taboos in which certain objects or themes (e.g. death) in a particular speech culture are not to be mentioned or discussed. Cultural myth, in turn, is ideological talk (e.g. equality for all) that works metaphorically to forge a sense of identity and unity among cultural members that belong to the same speech community. Finally, social drama or the "drama of the living" (Turner, 1980) is the elaborated cultural form that consists of the phases of a breach (a violation of the communal code), a crisis (the violation is publicized by cultural members), a redress (repairs violation), and re-integration back to the community or a schism exists between the offender and

the community at large (Turner, 1980, p. 149). In short, social drama poses challenge to the normative rules of a culture through rule-violation and rule-remedial behavior in relationship to the socio-cultural context.

Moving beyond the CCP approach to intercultural understanding, on the more specific level of analysis, the ethnographer can use Dell Hymes' (1974) Ethnography of SPEAKING approach (S-settings, P-participants, E-ends, A-act sequences, K-keys or manner of speaking, I-instrumentalities or nonverbal modes, N-norms, G-genres) to arrive at ethnographic coherence. While the CCP approach will trace the relationship between local cultural knowledge and interpretive coherence; Hymes' Ethnography of SPEAKING approach will track the relationship between local social knowledge (such as speaker's role, status, identity, age, and other situational constraints) and interpretive coherence to a conversation. The primary goal of the Ethnography of SPEAKING approach is to describe and interpret the values and beliefs that are attached to speech in a particular speech community. Specifically, working from this approach, the communication ethnographer may want to pay special attention to the ordinary conversational forms such as disclaimers (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975), accounts (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Stokes & Hewitt, 1976), remedial and legislative talk (Morris & Hopper, 1980), and speech act episodes (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975) which serve as the social "accounting process" (i.e. interpretive explanation from the native's perspective) of the intercultural discourse situation. For example social actors use "disclaimers" as a preconstruction and an affirmation that normative rules of permissible and impermissible conversational behaviors exist in a socially-sanctioned communicative situation. In essence, disclaimer is a verbal device "employed to ward off and defeat in advance doubts and negative typifications which may result from intended conflict" (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975, p. 3). Disclaimer, as a form of proactive accounting talks in a given situation

acknowledges the normative expectations of the audience and at the same time, diffuses their expectations. For example, an American speaker, in addressing her Japanese audience, may use the following disclaimer-opening: "I know it's not customary here to start a formal speech with a joke, but nevertheless ..." The disclaimer is used in the context to pre-construct and pre-affirm the implicit, social knowledge that both the speaker and the audience have of the HCC public speaking situation.

While disclaimer is a proactive symbolic act of rule-violation behavior, the use of excuse and justification constitute a class of retroactive accounting talks. Retroactive accounts are justificatory statements that reframe previous questionable actions and make them appear excusable or justified. Hence, the same American speaker, after addressing her Japanese audience, may offer the following retroactive explanation of the situation: "Well, I know I should not have started my formal speech with a joke, but the atmosphere was so tense and stiff, I needed to do something to warm up my audience . . ." Hence, the use of retroactive accounts in a problematic situation implies that certain implicit taken-for-granted social rules do exist in that particular discourse situation, and the social actor/actress needs to re-align himself/herself back to the speech community through retroactive, justifactory talks. According to Scott and Lyman (1968), excuses are "accounts in which one admits that the act in question is bad, wrong, or inappropriate but denies full responsibility," while justifications are "accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it" (p. 172).

However, while both the use of proactive and retroactive accounting talks connote the presence of high-consensus normative rules in a social situation, the use of remedial talk and legislative talk assumes the fluidity and the creative nature of explicit, negotiated talks of a given situation. According to

Morris and Hopper (1980), the primary function of "remedial talk" is to correct "deviations from previously established rules to distribute responsibility for problems to communicators" involved in the situation, while the primary function of "legislative talk" is to generate "new rules that can be used to p an actions and avoid future problems" (p. 269). Hence, for example, in the context of a superior-subordinate conversation in a U.S. organization, the conversants may jointly negotiate the problem and the responsibility associated with a late sales proposal and proceed to propose explicit plan of actions to circumvent future problems and misunderstandings. Explicit remedial talk and legislative talk are probably more prevalent and effective in low-context cultures than in high-context cultures, since in HCC systems, social conversation often takes the form of indirection, understatement, circumlocution, and "stepping-stone" mode of interaction.

Finally, the use of "speech act" is a distinctive socio-cultural speech form because one has to acquire the local, socio-cultural knowledge in order to interpret and engage in an effective "joking" act, a "teasing" act, a "complimenting" act, or an "insulting" act. The interpretive meanings that are attached to a "good" joke, a "good" tease, an "effective" compliment, or an "effective" insult are contextually defined in the values, ideals, and beliefs of a particular speech community. The manner and form of speech act delivery are also grounded in the implicit, socially-shared and socially-negotiated rules. Speech acts are in short, involved in the "interactive constitution of normative orders of human relations" and serve to establish the "normative orders of social events" (Streeck, 1980, p. 152). Speech acts monitor the social relationship of the conversants, regulate the emergent, interactive goal(s) of the conversational situation, and assert the constitutive properties of a given discourse situation. For example, the following three examples

may provide some cross-cultural insights into "compliment" as a speech act in a after-dinner social episode. An American after-dinner "compliment" episode would include the following adjacency pair: Guest:"Thank you for the wonderful dinner."/Host: "You are welcome" or "Oh, don't mention it." A Japanese after-dinner "compliment" speech routine would include: Guest: "The dinner is so rich and sumptuous. I'm very full."/Host: "There is really not enough food" or "The food is prepared by my humble wife" or "We should really invite you to a nice restaurant next time . . ." Finally, an Iranian "compliment" episode would include: Guest: "The foods are so wonderfully and beautifully prepared."/Host: "It is really your eyes which can appreciate them that are beautiful . . ." Hence, each compliment episode contains different compliment and counter-compliment strategies. The form and content of compliment, the how, when, and where the compliment may or may not be delivered, and with whom the compliment should be addressed to in a given social situation--can be studied and analyzed through the Ethnography of SPEAKING approach. The communication ethnographer can systematically, through painstaking observation and "thick description" methods, de-construct and re-assemble the socio-cultural texts that are needed to interpret and understand the symbolic life of a culture.

Fundamental to an interpretive perspective to intercultural understanding is a meaning-based approach to provide a full and thick interpretive explanation of the various everyday discourse situations that constitute the basic symbolic life of a culture. The symbolic life of a culture is expressed through different symbolic forms. In the context of human communication conduct, the use of "speech action" is perhaps the most pervasive form of human symbolic interaction. It is through the symbolic forms of speech that human interlocutors develop their socio-cultural knowledge of survival and adaptation within a culture. At the same time that the various symbolic patterns of speech reflect the "deep

meanings" of a coherent, socio-cultural system, culture itself, also provides the larger interpretive frame which propels the symbolic forms into meanings-in-action.

Ethnographic coherence entails the study of the normative relationship between communication and culture on one level, and an analysis of the meaning-emergent process of the everyday discourse situations from the cultural members' perspective, and from the ethnographer's interpretive perspective on another level. While an analysis of speech rituals, cultural myths, and social dramas of a culture will reveal the thematic motifs and underlying value patterns of a speech community, an in-depth ethnographic interpretation and an explanation of the everyday disourse situations (such as the use of disclaimers, proactive and retroactive accounting talks, remedial and legislative talks, and speech act episodes) will yield a fruitful picture concerning the social alignment situation between two cultural interactants --cojointly attempting to re-define the discourse situation through the creative process of human communication conduct.

In summary, this essay has addressed two critical questions that confront all intercultural communication researchers: First, what are the underlying characteristics of intercultural understanding? Second, what constitutes an interpretive perspective to intercultural understanding? The first question is addressed through a discussion on the importance of acquiring the implicit, taken-for-granted knowledge structures that influence everyday conversational usage in a culture. In order to understand the relationship between culture and everyday communication conduct, concepts such as cultural conversational pathway, the preferrable mode of interaction, the manner of delivery, turn-taking conversational rules in conjunction with appropriateness of context, are the basic building blocks to effective intercultural understanding. The second question is answered through the arguments for an ethnographic

coherence approach to elicit and simultaneously to evoke the system of socio-cultural meanings of a speech community. By using an interpretive conversational analysis approach in studying everyday communication conduct, the interpretive accounts of the local participants concerning an everyday discourse situation converge with that of the ethnographer's interpretive account of the situation. Through interpretive accounting methods, conversational analysis methods, and textual and metaphor analysis methods, the ethnographer may come close to grasping the "interpretive truths" of the symbolic life of a culture (Ting-Toomey, 1984).

In short, ethnographic coherence is a human interpretive enterprise, and as such, is subject to its own constraints and its own constancies. In one sense, one may never achieve absolute ethnographic coherence. At best, ethnographic understanding is always an approximation, a relative degree of understanding of certain glimpses, allusions, or partial metaphors of the symbolic life of a culture. As Geertz (1983) in this new text Local Knowledge, aptly notes: "What one will find is a number of actual interpretation of something . . . and a recurring cycle of terms--symbolic, meaning, conception, form, text . . . culture--designed to suggest there is a system in persistence, that all these so variously aimed inquiries are driven by a settled view of how one should go about constructing an account of the imaginative make-up of a society" (p.5). Ethnographic coherence, in short, is the emergent, interpretive process, of understanding human understanding. The communication ethnographer, in going through the cycles of surprise-breakdown-resolution stages, is embarked in an interpretive journey of evoking and reconstructing meanings of the symbolic life of a culture.

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